

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A1

NEW YORK TIMES  
17 March 1987

# Israelis Voice New Weariness At Scandal-Ridden Leaders

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Special to The New York Times

JERUSALEM, March 16 — Israel's largest newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, recently ran a photo spread of the country's top three leaders that summed up the prevailing mood toward politicians here.

One picture showed Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir covering his ears. The second picture showed Foreign Minister Shimon Peres covering his mouth, and the third showed Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin hiding his eyes.

The caption read, "Everyone covering up for everyone," and no one needed any further explanation.

## Wide Criticism of Leaders

More than at any other time since Israel's coalition Government was formed in September 1984, the Israeli public and political commentators have been expressing disappointment with their leaders.

The Government's role in the Jonathan Jay Pollard espionage case came under new scrutiny today as the Israeli radio reported that "state elements in Israel" indirectly paid \$80,000 to the Washington lawyer representing Mr. Pollard and his wife.

But the criticism goes beyond the Pollard case to include a series of intelligence-related scandals. More than a few voices are wondering aloud whether Mr. Shamir, 71 years old, Mr. Peres, 63, and Mr. Rabin, 65, have not been too long on the field of politics and might not benefit the country by stepping aside.

"It is doubtful that the public standing of the leadership has ever been as low as it is today," the commentator Avraham Shveitzer wrote in the newspaper Haaretz.

What has been so disturbing to political commentators and the public is the fact that Mr. Shamir, of the Likud bloc and Mr. Peres and Mr. Rabin of the Labor Party have been involved in three scandals in the last two years. In each case, Israeli commentators assert, the three leaders denied any knowledge of wrongdoing under their ministerial responsibility; handled the affairs in a way that was embarrassing for Israel and legally questionable, and blocked any serious challenge of their behavior by choosing not to criticize one another.

Ordinarily they would have been immediately called to account by the opposition. But Likud and Labor are united in a "national unity" coalition that has such an overwhelming majority in Parliament that they do not have to worry about a vote of no confidence as long as they stick together.

Mr. Shamir, Mr. Peres and Mr. Rabin, the Yediot commentator Yeshayahu Ben-Porath noted, are "trapped and tied up and involved amongst themselves in a complex knot of spider webs."

## 'Dependence and Cover-up'

Mr. Ben-Porath asserted that in the Shin Beth scandal, in which Israel's domestic intelligence service was found to have slain two Palestinian bus hijackers in custody in April 1984, Mr. Peres and Mr. Rabin sided with Mr. Shamir, who was Prime Minister when the killings occurred, in protecting the head of Shin Beth from any punishment. They then united to dismiss the Attorney General who wanted to investigate the case, the commentator added, and they arranged pardons for the security officials involved.

In the Iran arms affair, Mr. Ben-Porath said, Mr. Shamir returned the favor by standing up for the decisions made by Mr. Peres and Mr. Rabin to involve Israel in an arms-for-hostages arrangement with Iran.

In the Pollard case, Mr. Ben-Porath went on, "the mutual dependence and cover-up, and refusal to investigate or be investigated, reached supreme perfection."

All three leaders, he added, backed each other in asserting that they knew nothing of the Israeli spying operation, in supporting the promotion of the Israeli officials involved in the espionage and in arranging for a belated and watered-down investigation by a two-member committee.

## 'We Are Not They'

In an open letter to the American people in Haaretz, the commentator B. Michael wrote: "My dear America, make a clear distinction between the citizens of Israel and the Government of Israel. We are not they and they are not we."

He referred not only to the intelligence cases but to the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila, in which Lebanese militiamen operating in the Israeli occupation zone in Lebanon killed hundreds of Palestinians. "This is the fourth or fifth time," he said of the Israeli leaders, "that they are trying to sell me the miserable jingle: 'We did not know, did not hear, did not see, did not report and we are not responsible. Pollard, Iran, Shin Beth, Sabra and Shatila — we're just ministers. No one tells us anything.' And they continue to sit on their chairs. If my I.Q. were not

greater than the speed limit inside the city, I might buy this once, twice, even three times — but not five."

"I hope America," he continued, "you are beginning to understand that I am also insulted just like you. According to accepted democratic reasoning, it would be time for these men to pack their bags and go home. But the reality here is that prime ministers and people with top postings are changed only when one can find an alternative that is worse."

## Pressure to Kill the Coalition

In an article titled "Three Wise Monkeys," Yosef Goell, an editorial writer for The Jerusalem Post, wrote: "The real cause for concern is that the conscious determination not to know too much, the failure to exercise effective control over the bodies officially responsible to them and the propensity for bad judgment evinced by our top leaders in the Pollard affair was not a one-time affair but the catastrophic continuation of a long-term pattern."

What makes the current situation even more unusual is that the banding together of Mr. Peres, Mr. Shamir and Mr. Rabin comes at a time of heightened political tensions among them. Mr. Shamir and Mr. Peres are barely on speaking terms over political differences, and relations between Mr. Rabin and Mr. Peres are not much better.

But for now, Mr. Peres, Mr. Shamir and Mr. Rabin are sticking together in opposing any new elections, at least until the latest affairs blow over. None of them seem to want an election now that might focus on the question of leadership, upset their mutually necessary alliance, or invite challenges from within their own parties.

"Shamir and Peres are like a couple who were driving to the rabbi in order to get a divorce," said Nahum Barnea, editor of the political weekly Koteret Rasheet. "On the way to the rabbi's office, though, they suddenly get the news that their son fell out the window and is in the hospital. So they forget the divorce and rush to deal with their immediate problem. There is no doubt that they don't want to be married any more, but right now they have to stick together."